Teacher storytelling: A means for creating and learning within a collaborative space

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Abstract

Research has suggested that collaborative professional communities of teachers support on-going teacher professional development, school reform, and student achievement. Little research has outlined how teachers, especially high school teachers, develop new patterns of interaction to create such communities. This article focuses on how teacher storytelling fostered collegiality and learning for a cross-disciplinary group of high school teachers. The storytelling helped the teachers create a collaborative learning space, link the personal–private realm of teaching to the public-conceptual realm, reflect on their teaching and see new practical directions, and co-construct a shared understanding of good pedagogy.

Keywords: Teacher collaboration; Professional development; Storytelling; Secondary teachers; Professional community; Teacher learning

1. Introduction

High schools can be intellectually and socially isolating places for teachers. Their organizational structures are complex and fragmented, their programs and staffing are specialized, and their goals for students are frequently implicit or individualistic (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). Furthermore, the structures of time, space and curriculum do not afford high school teachers opportunities for sustained and in-depth collaborative examination of their teaching practices or student learning. The most common interactions between teachers—sharing ideas, materials and resources; telling stories about their classrooms and students; scanning for ideas; and exchanging advice and help—occur most often as brief snatches of conversation in hallways or common work spaces and do nothing more than perpetuate the norms of teacher privacy, non-interference, autonomy (Little, 1990) and pedagogical status quo (Lortie, 1975). These interactions rarely foster collegiality or shared meanings and directions. As Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) baldly state, “The simple fact is that the structures for on-going community do not exist in American high schools” (p. 947).

In recent years, however, research has found that schools in which collaborative or collegial professional communities do exist among teachers on-going teacher professional development is possible, coherence across teaching practices is created, and collective responsibility among teachers for student learning is cultivated (Barth, 1990; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman et al., 2001; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman, 1996b; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993, 2001; Newmann &
Specifically, collaborative professional communities enhance teachers’ ability to meet the increasingly diverse learning needs of students (Lieberman & Miller, 1992; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

While the characteristics of and conditions for these communities have been studied and described (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Louis et al., 1996; McLaughlin, 1994), little research focuses on how a conventionally organized high school fosters a collaborative professional community or how teachers begin the process of creating a shared vision for their students and themselves. Setting aside time and space to meet is necessary, but it does not guarantee that teachers will collaborate or establish a learning community. Other conditions must be present.

In this article I focus on how telling stories about teaching and learning facilitated the creation of a collaborative learning space for a group of high school teachers meeting regularly over a year and half in a Collaborative Inquiry Group. Specifically, I focus on how teacher storytelling: (1) facilitated the creation of a collaborative learning space based on trust, validation, collegiality, authenticity, and open doubt; (2) provided the participating teachers mirrors for thinking about practice and windows for seeing pedagogical possibilities; (3) helped the teachers connect the personal-practical dimension of their practice—the domain of individual classrooms and minds—with the more public, conceptual dimension of pedagogical issues; and finally, (4) facilitated a shared understanding of what constitutes good pedagogy. This study shows that storytelling, when grounded in teachers’ experience and authentic practical or conceptual questions, and sustained through regularly scheduled meetings, is an important means for both creating and learning within a collaborative space.

2. Methodology

This article is based on data collected in a qualitative case study conducted with the Collaborative Inquiry Group (CIG) at Trudeau High School, a midwestern rural school of 950 students and 60 faculty members. At the time of the study, teachers in the Trudeau CIG were part of a state-sponsored CIG project designed to foster collaborative cultures and authentic teacher learning in Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) affiliated schools. For the project, schools were invited to form a CIG of six to eight teachers who would commit to attending a summer institute on inquiry and meet about issues of practice on a regular basis throughout the school year.

Based in the theories of social learning and teacher research, project designers assumed that in order to make fundamental and enduring changes in their curriculum and pedagogy, teachers had to come together and grapple with the meaning of their current practices, not as obedient consumers, but as engaged learners. They had to design and implement their own pathways of change through sustained collaborative investigation and reflection. Through collective deliberation, teachers could capitalize on the social nature of learning, and break through the wall of privacy and individualism that so often characterizes teaching. During the summer institutes, teachers were guided to pose questions about their practice and design ways to document their discoveries about those questions with their CIG colleagues.

The Trudeau CIG members took an engaged approach to the project. Of the high school groups in the state project, the Trudeau CIG alone sustained its participation over the project’s 3 year tenure, and viewed the project as a means to build capacity in its school. They consistently attended the week long summer institutes and deliberately increased teacher participation through the project. Each summer, new members accompanied veteran group members to the Collaborative Inquiry Institute, and new teachers joined experienced teachers in the examination of practices. Gradually, the CIG at Trudeau became a cross-disciplinary group of new and veteran teachers. At the beginning of my study, the group had seven regularly attending members from five of the ten academic departments. By the second year of my study, 13 teachers, almost a fourth of the faculty, representing all but two of the academic departments, were participating in the group. Three of the members of the group had more than 20 years of experience, six had less than 5 years of experience, and four had been teaching for 6–10 years.

2.1. My stance as researcher

I had two roles in the group: researcher and external coach. These roles enabled me to be both

1Trudeau is a pseudonym, as are all of the names of study participants.
inside and outside of the group’s process. Assuming this dual role is a stance that many school reform researchers claim is essential in helping schools navigate the complexity of change. According to Lieberman (1996a) and Sarason (1990), researchers of school reform must dispense with the role of dispassionate observer, in order to get to know and enlist the trust of educators as research participants. From this “passionate” position, researchers can then understand the contextual complexities in their study sites and make realistic recommendations. Moreover, researchers who take such a stance can also situate local issues in larger social and conceptual interpretive frames.

As an insider, I often participated in the discussions of the group by framing questions, offering insights, and suggesting courses of action. In these instances, I acted as the group’s coach and colleague. On other occasions, I participated as an observer, looking from an outsider’s perspective, trying to understand what was happening. Unlike the study participants, who, as one of them noted, “have their noses pressed right up against their work,” I could view the group with a less invested, more objective eye. Combined in one stance, the insider–outsider position enabled me to shift my perspective back and forth between a distant and near view.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The 14-month study spanned two academic years, beginning in February of 1999 and ending in May of 2000. The data collection focused on the bi-monthly group meetings, group members’ perceptions of their learning within the group, and the classroom practice and pedagogical change of five core members of the group.2 During my attendance at 14 of the group’s meetings, I audio-taped discussions and wrote field notes. I formally interviewed all participating members of the group once, and core members twice, in 30–60 min sessions, using a semi-structured protocol. I conducted 21 interviews in all. I also had informal conversations with core members as I shadowed them and observed their classes on full day visits. The interviews and informal conversations conducted with CIG members enabled me to understand how the group meetings influenced their thinking and their practice.

Often the group meeting discussions took the form of storytelling. I was at first not conscious of the importance of telling stories for creating a collaborative space where the teachers could support, validate, challenge, and learn with one another. In fact, early in my study I thought the stories diverted the teachers’ attention from more “important” conceptual or theoretical issues of their inquiries. Once I allowed myself, however, to see the stories as analytic possibilities and ask the questions, “So what function do these stories have?” and “Why does Todd tell that story over and over?” with a researcher’s eye, I recognized the narrative nature of the teachers’ practice and began to understand how sharing stories from their classrooms enabled them to put their experience into language so they could understand it. The stories did not divert the teachers from learning; they were in fact a powerful means for learning.

3. Conceptual grounding: storytelling in teachers’ lives

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of being human: we make sense of the complex and unordered world of our experience by crafting story lines (Bruner, 1990). The stories we tell and hear help us connect our actions to our thoughts and emotions, and enable us to imagine new possibilities and find moral grounding in sometimes uncertain circumstances (McEwan & Kieren, 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Particularly for teachers, whose work is a constant stream of social engagement and action, telling stories is a means for making sense of everyday experience and for connecting with their colleagues. Storytelling among teachers is so commonplace that Judith Warren Little calls it an “omnipresent feature of teachers’ work lives” (1990, p. 515).

When a high school teacher emerges from her classroom and retreats to the faculty workroom or stands watch in the hall with her next door neighbor, she may exclaim, “Well, that went well” (or “badly,” as the case may be). The “that” is the experience she just had executing a lesson or interacting with students. If time permits, she may make sense of her just-lived experience through a recreation of the experience in narrative form. Whether aware or not, when she chooses to tell the story, she does so for a particular reason and

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2The core members of the group were those teachers who had been engaged in the group consistently and with dedication from the beginning of the initiative.
most likely for a particular audience (Gudmundsdottir, 1995). If she chooses not to tell the story, she also does so for a particular reason and because of the particular audience. In this way, storytelling is a social practice; it is a means of helping teachers understand and navigate the social and cultural contexts in which they work. Storytelling enables them to understand themselves in the immediate context of school life as well as in the more abstract world of educational ideas. It is a means for both connecting to others and developing professional identities.

Storytelling as a social practice is clearly described in Langellier’s (1989) analysis of the theoretical understandings of the role of personal narratives in our everyday lives. In a five part continuum, Langellier outlines the function of personal narratives in relation to communication, performance and interpretation. At one end of the continuum is the individualistic view of narrative as strictly a means for self-representation. At the other end is the view of personal narrative as a means for negotiating power relationships within a social setting. Briefly, the five theoretical orientations include:

1. Personal narrative as story-text: Stories from the past are told to represent the self for a particular and significant reason in the present. The social context of the story’s audience is not examined. Rather, the text is analyzed as if detached from any surroundings.

2. Personal narrative as storytelling performance: Stories are forms of embodied personal communication that take place in a social context to affect the immediate audience in a particular way. The social context beyond the circumstances of the story is not examined.

3. Personal narrative as conversational interaction: Stories are mutually constructed in the natural course of conversational interaction. Stories are presented with a meaningful purpose in the present, but are connected to past experiences and future possibilities.

4. Personal narrative as social process: Stories are told as a means to link private and public discourse, thus connecting individuals not only to the immediate social context, but also to broader social and cultural contexts existing beyond the immediate storytelling setting.

4. Understandings from the study

The social effect of the storytelling was educative. The stories helped teachers improve their practice by facilitating the creation of a certain kind of learning space. They helped the teachers see themselves in new ways, connect their private worlds of practice to those of others and to broader educational issues, and develop shared norms of good teaching practice.

4.1. Creating a learning space based on authenticity, risk-taking, trust, and open doubt

As I analyzed the effect the stories told during their meetings had on Trudeau CIG members’ thinking and pedagogy, I focused on the function of the stories in creating the particular cultural conditions in the group, in mediating the teachers’ perceptions of themselves and their practice, and in shaping a individual and collective sense of common purpose and shared understanding. The questions I considered were: What happens when the group members tell the stories? How do the stories shape perceptions and the social process? By viewing the personal storytelling as a social process of the group, I began to see how storytelling helped the group members make sense of their own and others’ teaching practice and build collegial relationships.
Rachel expressed doubt about her teaching and the group rallied to help. Rachel's willingness to tell her story about her grading practices—a topic typically reserved for teachers' private domain—opened up the possibility for others to risk as well. As Carole, a core member of the group noted,

[Rachel] was the first one willing to be, I don’t want to use the word criticized, but she was the first one to bring [a rubric and say], “Hey there’s weaknesses [sic] here.” I knew there were others using them, but nobody...brought the scoring process to light which has always been our own personal thing. So hers was the first one where we really tore into it…. Once she did that, a bunch of others did…. She was willing to be vulnerable. (Interview, 2/00)

As a result of Rachel's sharing, the teachers realized, perhaps subconsciously, that when they focused on their own teaching practices—the topics most authentic to them—they could impact each others' understandings and practices. The stories they told, when grounded in their own experiences and questions, facilitated risk-taking and reflection. A sense of collegial learning began to pervade the CIG members' interactions and collaboration between members began to extend beyond the confines of the group meeting time. Group members met in the halls and visited each other across the expanse of the building to confer about Rachel's and their own scoring mechanisms. As Teresa, an experienced teacher and senior member of the group, noted:

In collaborative inquiry if I’m thinking about doing something and I’m just not quite sure that I’ve thought it all through yet, I can hop and talk to two or three of them and say, “what do you think? Is there enough breadth here?” (Interview, 1/00)

In subsequent meetings, the CIG members posed questions about concrete products and experiences of their practice and told stories to illuminate the contexts of their practice. Through story sharing they allowed their colleagues to see into their practices and thinking. They began to share their doubts about their practices more openly and to trust each other. The group became a collaborative learning space.

4.2. Stories as mirrors of practice and windows into possibility

The stories also enabled the group members to reflect on their practices and see new possible actions. A particularly pointed example is the story Bart, the most experienced teacher in the group, told about his unit on Newtonian mathematics, entitled “What the heck does M mean?” Bart, a science teacher of 22 years, had taught the unit in his interdisciplinary course, Integrated Historical Astronomy, before, but his current students were struggling, so he brought his concerns to the CIG.

Bart: I’ve done this unit before, but after I gave the students the first objective sheet and they began to work through the calculations, I realized they didn’t have an understanding of what I wanted them to do. The unit is a mathematics unit, but the students didn’t have enough of an understanding of Newton’s laws to do the math. I had to change the unit and the objectives of the unit to include a way for students to show their understanding of the laws. So I included an essay, where they had to explain the calculations and the laws, as well as do the computation…. I gave the problems two days before the test. The test was two class periods long, because I thought if they were going to do a good job on the essays it would take them that much time. So they had the Friday before Christmas and the Monday after. So I gave them the problems on Thursday before Christmas. I used my own paper, so they couldn’t use their paper. It was open note. …They could use books in the classroom, if they got stuck. They were to put their test and notes up before they consulted a book. They could also huddle with other students. …Most of the students are freshmen and sophomores and some juniors and seniors. Some students stayed after school on the Friday before Christmas to work on this. …Any questions?

The math problems and questions Bart had expected his students to answer were quite involving and demanding. In response to what she saw, Clarissa, the home economics teacher, widened her
eyes and mouth in amazement. Bart was asking a great deal of 9th and 10th graders.

Teresa: What was their reaction when they got the test? Were they shocked?
Bart: No, they already knew what to expect. I was pretty pleased with how they did. They worked really hard and their grades were pretty good. Not all A's, but…

Carole: Did last year’s class just have to do calculations? (Bart nodded.) Was there a deeper understanding this year?
Bart: I’m sure of it.

Teresa: If you were to write about it, what would you say?
Bart: When students just do the calculations, they just plug in numbers. This way they have to explain it.

Clarissa: Were scores higher?
Bart: Yes.
Teresa: Part way through you knew that students weren’t going to get it, how did you know?
Bart: Their level of frustration. They were almost excited when I said they would have to do essays. It was a relief to them…. One student didn’t do it. He sat for two days.

Teresa: What did you do? We all have those kids.
Bart: Nothing. It’s his choice. The kid probably realized it was too much work for him, because mathematically he was going to fail anyway. But I did have students who worked really hard, but won’t pass mathematically… .

Teresa: Think of the kids who didn’t do well. Why didn’t they do well? I’m asking as a fellow teacher, because I am trying to figure this out. Was it that they don’t know how to take notes? Or write? Or were they absent a lot?
Bart: No, attendance was good. It’s effort.
Adrian: Consistent effort.

Clarissa: I wonder if it’s the same kids who come to us from the middle school with Fs.
Todd: Students have to take ownership.
Teresa: Is it maturity or habits of mind?
Adrian: It’s probably an individual matter. Is it the exercise of habits?
Bart: Overall immaturity. When I look at my son, the one student who didn’t take the test at all is probably at a 5th grade level of maturity [in comparison]…. 

Teresa: We have the students we have. How do we create a bridge?
David: I see those kids too. It’s about creating the bridge.
Adrian: Developing patterns.
David: It’s about learning a process and consistency.
Adrian: Here’s what I do: I give them study hints and when they aren’t doing very well, we review the study hints and I make suggestions about what they should do next. I help them add one thing in changing their habits.

Teresa: So what can we do? Keeping them to habits, creating patterns. We only have them now. There is the maturity issue, socially, emotionally, etc.

Bart’s story and the ensuing discussion provided several people a mirror of their own practice. While relatively quiet in the meeting, Carole commented to me after the CIG meeting that through the discussion of Bart’s unit she began thinking about why assessments or tests had to be secret and surprises to students. She was impressed that Bart had given the students the questions in advance and had provided them ample class time and resources for answering tough questions. If she wanted students to do well on higher level assessments, why didn’t she give them the tools to do just that? She related it to the work world, a constant lens for Carole. In the workplace, workers would readily have available resources to complete their work tasks. Why didn’t she treat students in that authentic way? Later in the year, Carole did in fact incorporate the idea of allowing students to use classroom resources for some assessments.
Teresa, in reflecting upon Bart’s story, was able to think about her own students who, like the young man who did not do the work, often chose not to do difficult work. She wondered how she (and they all) could help students develop the habits of work and mind to do well on such demanding assessments. Bart’s story provided her with both a mirror of her own practice and a window into possibilities not yet imagined. In a subsequent interview, Teresa pointed to this particular group meeting as an example of how she could imagine possibilities through what her colleagues shared.

Teresa: I know I get a lot more strategies [in the group]. Otherwise I think I am going to be thinking in a box about what I do. You tend to only do your familiar things until somebody else—specifically say, Bart, at the last meeting when he talked about how he gets these kids to do their own research and put these things together… . He’s doing what we say we want to do for all kids. I may not be able to think about how to do that.

Melody: By yourself?
Teresa: By myself. I don’t think I would and it’s not comfortable. And I don’t have the time, but in a meeting when I’m listening to him or when Todd would interject or Jerome would interject, and it makes me think about possibilities or starting points. Maybe that’s what it is. It gives me some toeholds, where I can think, “Oh, I could do that. All I would have to do would be to change this just a little bit. Change the way I am presenting it to the kids, change the way I am going to assess it and that would give this a whole new dimension. The kids would be thinking more critically. They would be expressing in a written form and that would be part of the standard that they are trying to reach.”
(Interview, 1/00)

When Bart did that project thing just a couple of weeks ago, I thought, “Oh, God, I’d love to do that, but how do I find the time to make that happen?”…. I see things and I even dream of things that I would like to do and I can’t cough up any more time than what I’m doing now. That frustrates me. If I could have more time to do more creative things. Then at the same time, I said, “Well, I can tweak something for next year. That, I have the power to do. And make some changes like he did.” He said, “I’ve done this unit but never this way.” Well, maybe I can’t do it like Bart did it, because he’s at this level, but I can make it one step closer to that by changing some of the way I do it. (Interview, 2/00)

From these women’s comments, it is evident that Bart’s story enabled them to see possibilities and be inspired, but the learning was not all one-sided. Bart certainly considered one of his roles in the group to help others—to provide windows of possibility, but he also found the group the best professional development he had ever experienced. It helped him reflect upon his own practices and imagine new practices. “When I am listening to what other people are doing and hearing them, that stimulates my own internal suggestions about what I should do” (Interview, 2/00).

4.3. Linking the personal-practical to the collective-conceptual and back again

Frequently the concrete, practical examples presented in the CIG meetings were springboards for the consideration of more general or conceptual topics or underlying assumptions or ideas. Telling personal, practical stories was the foundation for in-depth examination of collective and conceptual issues. The group moved easily from the “what” and “how” to “why,” “so what” and “what if.” As can be seen in the transcript of the exchange following Bart’s story of his unit, Teresa made the connection between Bart’s personal experience to a collective and eventually conceptual issue, when she claimed, “We all have those kids.” Her statement opened up a conversation that involved the group members in considering possible reasons for students’ low achievement or lack of engagement. They considered level of effort, attendance, and maturity. They then talked both on conceptual and practical levels about what they needed to do for these students. In this exchange, the group members
were constantly linking the personal-practical and the collective-conceptual realms of teacher thinking.

In a similar way, a story about the construction and use of a rubric shared in another group meeting served as a means to link the two realms. Beth, Todd’s student teacher, quite bravely brought her first rubric to the group for review. The rubric, a scoring guide for a US history group time-line presentation had five criteria: accuracy, organized, content, creative, and effort. Having given the rubric to students in advance, Beth had expected high quality. But, some did not understand the categories of content correctly even with direct assistance from Beth. Beth and Todd both talked in detail about particular students who sat and did very little on the project. Beth was quite dissatisfied with the final products.

As Beth and Todd finished their story, Teresa chimed in with a question that simultaneously offered a challenge for Beth and made the issue a universal one for all to ponder. The question seemed to be one Teresa was pondering herself.

Teresa: Shouldn’t giving students the rubric in advance improve the quality of the work?

Bart: Not in my experience. I have designed rubrics that weighed some parts of the assignment with only 5% and other more substantive parts, like analysis or synthesis of content, with 60% and students still spend most of their time on the portion of the project that is only worth 5%.

Melody: Isn’t it possible that students don’t know how to approach the more substantive parts? Maybe you should drop those less important parts, so students just focus on the substantive areas.

Bart: Then they wouldn’t do them at all.

Others: Yeah.

Melody: It might be important to think about the valued criteria as developmental. Students need to develop the skills or habits of analyzing and synthesizing content over time.

Bart: Yeah, that’s true. That assignment was only a beginning assignment and I will continue to help students develop over time.

After the brief discussion of broader concepts in regard to using rubrics, the discussion returned to the details of Beth’s rubric, only to move again to broader issues. This time I asked the question.

Melody: I wonder about effort as a criterion. Is it fair to give students grades for effort? Should it be assessed?

Bart: Is it fair not to?

Melody: How do you know if a student has put effort into an assignment?

Beth: (defending herself) I can watch kids putting effort or not putting much effort into their work. Their lack of effort is reflected in the care in the final product.

Todd: (Repeating the previous lament about students) Some students just didn’t work very hard on this assignment and it showed in their time lines.

Melody: But isn’t it the quality of the product we’re interested in?

Bart: Maybe not. Maybe it’s the process that goes into it as well. Don’t we want students to demonstrate care and effort in their work? I certainly do.

Melody: Isn’t there a way to capture that in another criterion or descriptor though? A quality that could be seen in the actual product?

The group then returned to the concrete situation in front of them and discussed some possible alternatives for effort: care, presentation of material, and finally, craftsmanship. We all agreed that such a descriptor might capture Beth and Todd’s idea of effort and be a quality of the product.

The tone of Beth and Todd’s story was negative and could have, if accepted, drawn the group into a session of complaining about students’ apathy or lack of effort toward learning. Instead, because the group members had an established level of trust and were dedicated to critical inquiry about their practices, they launched into a constructive conversation about the practice of designing and using rubrics. In the discussion, Beth’s rubric became a rubric to consider in general as well as particular terms. The question: Was this rubric fair? moved to the question: Were rubrics fair? The specific incidence of examining the rubric and its story enabled the group to think about the use of rubrics,
the appropriateness of particular categories, the development of students’ capabilities over time, and the place of effort in the assessment of student work.

4.4. Stories as means for shaping norms of practice

The sharing of stories helped the CIG members negotiate an understanding of the norms of instructional practice. For example, Bart’s story helped other CIG members understand that asking students to engage in challenging work was possible. In a meeting where Carole, a business teacher, was sharing her dilemma with unmotivated, disenfranchised students, group members offered stories or suggestions grounded in their own experience, as well as an anecdote about one of the school’s historical icons, to point out to Carole how she might rethink her practices. At the same time, they were collectively coming to a shared understanding of good teaching practice.

Carole: In Intro to Business I get more freshmen and sophomores. The last class of the day, especially, a 1/3 are now failing and they’re almost all freshman. I’m just spinning my wheels. One thing I’ve done for almost every chapter... because I know they’re not going to read the chapter, is make up questions. By the time they get done [with the questions] they’ve read most of the chapter, and then I throw in some extra questions that take it to the next level…. [E]ven the higher academic students seem to like this because they have a sense of accomplishment. Ok, I did this. So that’s one thing. That’s helped a little bit with those that are struggling. But I would like to see what some of you guys [think].

As Carole talked, Todd was pounding on the table with excitement. What Carol had done in her classes—making study guides for chapters—he had done in his own class prior to requiring that students actively demonstrate their knowledge through public presentations.

Todd: It’s so easy to fail by doing it yourself, without anyone seeing anything. It’s a lot harder to fail, if you have to get up in front of class and present information to other people. I noticed that a lot with my students.

Adrian: Being responsible for a group...

Todd: Being responsible for a group, maybe not even that, but having to get up in front of class...

Adrian: If you are sharing information you are responsible to the whole class...

Todd: Right.

Bart: I have a student in my integrated class who ended up first semester with maybe 40%, maybe 30%. Freshman. Never showed me anything. This semester we started group things, research, and all of a sudden, he, his group, had to tell the story of Perseus and Andromeda, Pegasus mythology. And I thought out of the whole class he personally probably did one of the best jobs. It’s like night and day. And that will continue. I mean it was remarkable and I think to a group, responsibility to the class, that fear factor that he was going to have to get up there. He did it, he knew it…. . He was the lead person in his group to start the story. The whole class had that expectation that, “Oh, no, here he goes again. He’s going to blow this. It’s going to be stupid.” It didn’t happen.

Teresa: I know that the most efficient and traditional way it to write it all down, but is that what helps them?

Bart: Bob S________ used to give them the answers to the test the day before the test, literally, and they still wouldn’t know the answers.

Tracy: I think sometimes they know the information, but they need a different vehicle to be able to convey...

Teresa: That’s what I’m wondering. Is it the vehicle? Or is it the…?

Adrian: You could mix up the mode of success and see what [happens]…. . Some kids can memorize… [She goes on to emphasize the importance of hands-on, manipulative, concrete means, like models, to help kids understand concepts.] But mix it up….
Tracy: It’s amazing to me the contrast, students who are maybe very successful at this format (study guide), you put them on a group project or have them write a paper, they fail. I mean that’s very hard for them. I kind of like that, because it gives everybody a chance to maybe be successful in one format. (CIG Mtg., 1/28/00)

Carole framed best practice as simplifying and providing more informational guides for students as a means for assisting them. Todd, Bart and Adrian—all teachers who had incorporated student exhibitions as a means of assessment in their classes—constructed a new norm of good practice for Carole: expecting students to demonstrate their work in front of their peers adds additional accountability not possible on individually completed tests. Teresa, through her experientially grounded suggestion, and Bart, through his anecdote about Bob S_______, constructed a second norm of good practice: doing more for students does not necessarily help them learn to use their minds well nor does it ensure improved achievement. Teresa and Adrian, through their exchange, constructed a third norm of practice: providing a variety of means for students to demonstrate their knowledge will likely support a diversity of learners. This collective construction of good teaching practices not only benefitted Carole, but all group members. Sustained over time, the collaborative storytelling was essential for framing a shared vision for pedagogical practice.

5. Concluding thoughts and implications

In her examination of the effects of various forms of teacher interaction on building collegial relationships among teachers, Little (1990) is skeptical that teacher storytelling, especially done in brief encounters, can break through the norms of privacy, autonomy and non-interference to foster collegiality. She doubts that such brief encounters carry with them the complexity of the teaching contexts within which the stories are embedded, or “illuminate the principles that underlie teachers’ planning and teaching-in-action” (p. 515).

My analysis of the role storytelling played for the Trudeau CIG members indicates that stories can in fact be significant in the creation of a collaborative space that fosters teacher learning, thus breaking through the conventional norms of teaching. When viewed as a social process (Langellier, 1989), teacher storytelling is a means of helping participants form new patterns of interaction, make sense of teaching practice, and imagine new practical and conceptual alternatives. As Langellier notes, stories are not only used to represent a past event in a present setting, but “to negotiate present and future events” (p. 261).

The conditions that enabled the impact of the stories for the Trudeau CIG members must be noted, however. As previously observed, until the group began focusing on the realm of the professional lives over which they had most control—their teaching practice—the conversations and shared stories kept them on a conversational treadmill and merely reinforced status quo thinking. What enabled the stories to facilitate collaboration and learning was first of all the focus on personally and professionally significant experiences, practices and ideas. The teachers broke through the walls that kept them separate and non-interfering by revealing their doubts and failures and presenting previously private pedagogical issues, like assessment and grading of student work, for collective deliberation and assistance. Their disclosures about their practices validated their experiences and helped them to connect to one another (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). They built trusting, supportive, collegial relationships, and began to rely on each other for assistance, support, and challenge.

The culture of risk-taking and trust the group developed in turn allowed them to critically reflect upon and analyze their teaching through inquiry, and make connections between each other’s practice and educational ideas. The verbal images and emotional expressions the stories provided put the tellers’ practice in a public space for examination. The listeners could reflect the images back to the narrator in new ways through questioning, counter-examples, and extensions. Simultaneously, the listeners could view their own practice through the mirror provided by the storyteller. The stories enabled them to, as Watson, Burke, and Harste (1989) suggest, “interrogate and understand the very constructs [they used] to make sense of the world” (p. 37). The CIG members could link their individual experiences to the public realm of practice and become a part of the collective fabric of teaching. They could move from the private, personal, and concrete realm to the public, collective and conceptual realm and back again.
The sustained time the group members had together also enlivened the role of storytelling. Because the group had met on a regular basis for over 2 years in long sessions, the stories became a natural part of their deliberations and enabled them to collaborate by examining their teaching publicly. The stories were not told in brief encounters, but in extended, focused conversations, thus enabling the CIG members to explore the ideas that grounded the practices. In a sense, each story was a case of practice from which not only the storyteller, but the audience could learn.

This study has significant implications for teacher education. It confirms the centrality of storytelling in teachers’ lives. It reveals the importance of engaging teachers, both novices or veterans, in telling stories about their teaching practices. Storytelling not only validates teachers’ experience and dilemmas, but also puts their experience into a form so it can be “turned upside down, stepped back from, twirled around and studied” (Watson et al., 1989, p. 37). It enables teachers to see beyond the domain of their personal experience and develop a shared understanding of teaching. It helps them realize that they are not alone in trying to make learning effective for students. Storytelling is, when grounded in an inquiry orientation and supported in sustained conversations, an important element in building the collegial relationships that foster serious and sustained collaborative deliberation of pedagogical issues.

Such deliberation is vital for creating school cultures that support learning for all students. In order to develop the classroom environments that nurture students’ construction of knowledge and understandings, high school teachers must be able to develop such environments for themselves. In our standards-based policy environment, high school teachers must collaborate about expectations for students and the practices that support high levels of achievement. They must create collaborative spaces where their individual practices are revealed, understood, critiqued and extended. As this study shows, storytelling can be a vital way to create such spaces.

References


